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DEES

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN SIERRA LEONE: QUIETLY IN THE
CLOSET

REF: STATE 130765

¶1. Summary: Sierra Leone has an archaic and seldom (if ever) enforced law against homosexual behavior on the books, but societal prejudices, rather than legal consequences, keep homosexual orientation hidden. There are no current initiatives to revise, eliminate, or enforce current legislation, and post was unable to contact any groups that advocated for or against gay rights. Web sites posted by groups in the past appeared inactive, and it is unclear if a lesbian activist killed several years ago was specifically targeted for her political activities, or simply one more victim of crime. Human rights programs similar to those that advanced women's rights and acceptance for HIV sufferers might help sensitize the population to support gay rights, but might also backfire by energizing groups interested in copying anti-gay rights movement in Uganda and elsewhere. Sexual orientation remains hidden, and it is unlikely that gay Sierra Leoneans will coming out in the open in the near term. End Summary.

The "Abominable Crime of Buggery"

¶2. Sierra Leone adopted at independence a number of British laws, including the 1861 Offences against Persons Act, which, under "unnatural offences" includes article 61 on "Sodomy and bestiality: Whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable crime of buggery, committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable..... to be kept in penal servitude for life." (Note: the ellipsis between liable... to be" are part of the citation, noting that at some point a portion of the original text was excised from the law). While article 61 of the law was eliminated from the British code, it is still on the books in Sierra Leone, although local lawyers contacted by Post could not recall a case in which the law had been applied.

¶3. There has been no attempt to deal specifically with this clause in parliament, but there has been some discussion about the need to revise the entire 1861 law to reflect modern sensibilities; nonetheless, there are no revisions pending or imminently anticipated.

What happens in the closet....

¶4. It appears that Sierra Leone does not have any active gay rights movement. Many Sierra Leoneans believe that homosexuality is practiced exclusively by, or through inducements from, foreigners -- it is assumed that homosexuals are either copying Western practices, or motivated by economics. A number of Sierra Leoneans, even those with considerable exposure to Western culture, said that homosexuality does not exist locally, and any cases were due directly to Western influence. The few Sierra Leoneans who admitted knowing someone they believed to be homosexual said that in no case would anyone openly admit it, and if they did, they would be shunned by their families and friends

and possibly threatened by community members. Unfortunately, Sierra Leoneans contacted on this issue were all heterosexual, as attempts by post to locate any openly gay nationals failed.

¶5. While societal stigmas keep homosexuality in the closet, there are no "witch hunts" demanding tougher legislation or enforcement of the 1861 law, either, and this in a country where communities do have actual witch hunts. Without active discrimination, or a critical mass of activists, individuals are unlikely assume the immediate negative consequences of going public to fight for greater acceptance down the road. In the absence of such activism, however, homosexuality is likely to continue to be viewed by Sierra Leoneans as it is now -- an abomination in the same category as pedophilia, bestiality, and witchcraft.

No torches and pitchforks.. yet

¶6. Some Sierra Leoneans worry that the national characteristic to "copy" other African states could lead to a replication of Ugandan events here, and worry that a small spark could set off a riot. This is not an expression of anti-homosexual sentiment, necessarily (although that sentiment exists, particularly in the countryside), but an expression of how a few misinformed individuals can turn out an angry mob to attack an accused thief, a witch, or anyone perceived to be an outsider. The lesbian activist gang-raped in her home may have been targeted for her political activities, but some believe she surprised burglars that had targeted her home for economic reasons. This explanation is possible, but it is noteworthy that no one has stepped in to take her place.

¶7. One Sierra Leonean commented that other movements -- some successful, some not -- have begun only when foreign donors funded projects to support them. Programs pushing for women's rights have yielded projects throughout the country, and legislation has changed dramatically to improve the status of women. It was recalled that before the international community began funding HIV/AIDS programs, stigma was a problem, but that it is now rarely seen. Contrarily, attempts to reduce Female Genital Mutilation have met with harsh criticism from local activists seeking to protect "traditional practices." Sierra Leoneans are divided on the likely outcome of similar Western-funded programs on gay rights, with some thinking it would give comfort and support sufficient to mobilize local activism, and others feeling it would create an anti-gay backlash. A Western-funded program might be viewed as an attempt to promote Western sexual practices, making it less effective, but it also might galvanize what few homosexuals in Sierra Leone might be willing to come out.

¶8. COMMENT: Homosexual orientation is not a front-burner issue in Sierra Leone, and is unlikely to become one soon. However debate could be triggered by further publicity on anti-gay activities in Uganda. More likely to provoke change is the inevitable debate on the broader need to revise the current 1861 laws into a more modern piece of legislation. Such a step will provide the international community the opportunity to encourage Sierra Leone to adopt laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. END COMMENT.
FEDZER